

# Photographic evidence for the occurrence of frigatebirds *Fregata* sp. in the Gulf of Guinea

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**Preuve photographique de la présence de frégates *Fregata* sp. dans le Golfe de Guinée.** Le 1<sup>er</sup> août 2015, une frégate immature a été photographiée près de l'île de Mosteiros, Príncipe. La forme et l'étendue du blanc sur les parties inférieures indiquent qu'il s'agissait d'une Frégate superbe *Fregata magnificens*. C'est la première preuve photographique de la présence d'une frégate dans le Golfe de Guinée.

On 1 August 2015, we photographed a frigatebird *Fregata* sp. (Figs. 1–2) near Mosteiros (01°41'N 07°28'E), a rocky 1-ha islet, 800 m north-east of Príncipe Island (Fig. 3). The white head and the pattern and extent of the white area on the underparts, extending to the underwings, indicate that it was an immature, but specific identification of frigatebirds in post-juvenile plumages can be problematic, with some Magnificent Frigatebirds at this age virtually indistinguishable from immature Great *F. minor* and Lesser Frigatebirds *F. ariel* without good photographs (Howell *et al.* 2014).

Only Magnificent Frigatebird has been definitely recorded in West African waters

(Borrow & Demey 2014). Ascension Frigatebird *F. aquila* was considered a possible vagrant to the Gulf of Guinea (Brown *et al.* 1982), but there is no proof of this, as the historical records of frigatebirds from the Gulf of Guinea pre-date its recognition as a separate species (Jones & Tye 2006). No frigatebird species is mentioned on the ABC checklist of Príncipe (Dowsett *et al.* 2015), although there are two recent observations, involving at least four individuals over the Tinhosas islets, south-west of Príncipe, in August 1991, and two immatures between São Tomé and Príncipe in March 1992 (Jones & Tye 2006). None was identified to species, but it has been suggested that they are more likely to have been



**Figures 1–2.** Immature frigatebird *Fregata* sp., near Mosteiros Islet, Príncipe, 1 August 2015 (Estrela Matilde). The shape and extent of the white area on the underparts are suggestive of a Magnificent Frigatebird *F. magnificens*.

Frégate immature *Fregata* sp., près de l'île de Mosteiros, Príncipe, 1<sup>er</sup> août 2015 (Estrela Matilde). La forme et l'étendue du blanc sur les parties inférieures suggèrent qu'il s'agit d'une Frégate superbe *F. magnificens*.



**Figure 3.** (a) Location of Príncipe Island and (b) Mosteiros Islet.  
(a) Situation de Príncipe et de (b) l'île de Mosteiros.

is correct, the Mosteiros bird could not have been this species.

Lesser Frigatebird is a relatively small and light-bodied frigatebird, being appreciably smaller than Magnificent Frigatebird, although this can be difficult to judge in a lone bird (Howell *et al.* 2014). Immature Lesser Frigatebirds have a large white patch on the underparts, usually with 'untidy' white spurs, a tapered rear edge and, occasionally, a dusky collar (Howell *et al.* 2014). Lesser Frigatebird ranges from the Indian Ocean through the tropical west and central Pacific, with a small, endangered population in the South Atlantic off Brazil, which is considered mostly sedentary (Howell *et al.* 2014), making occurrence in the Gulf of Guinea unlikely.

In immature Great Frigatebirds the white belly patch is either rounded or tapered at the rear, whereas in Magnificent Frigatebirds it is always tapered, with a steep angle of black on the flanks (shallower in Magnificent) resulting in a narrower belly patch, as in the bird we photographed. Great Frigatebird ranges from the Indian Ocean through the tropical Pacific, and also breeds in the South Atlantic off Brazil, with no transatlantic movements recorded (Howell *et al.* 2014), which again makes it unlikely that the bird we observed was this species.

Magnificent Frigatebird at least formerly bred on the Cape Verdes and is a rare visitor to West African seas (BirdLife International & NatureServe 2014). The Cape Verde population

Magnificent Frigatebirds that had wandered from the western Atlantic than Ascension Frigatebirds (Jones & Tye 2006).

Ascension Island and the Cape Verdes are the only locations known to hold breeding populations of frigatebirds in the eastern Atlantic (Orta *et al.* 2014). Although immature plumages of Ascension Frigatebird appear to be inadequately known (S. N. G. Howell *in litt.* 2015), a partial or complete brown breast-band always seems to be present (Harrison 1983, Orta *et al.* 2014); if this

is now probably functionally extinct (López-Suárez *et al.* 2012) and therefore an unlikely source for vagrants. The occasional occurrence of Magnificent Frigatebirds in the Azores, Madeira and the Canary Islands, for example, has been attributed to transatlantic movements rather than to stray individuals from the Cape Verdes (García-del-Rey 2011, López-Suárez *et al.* 2012), and the same might be true for the bird we observed.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Alexandre Leitão, Carlos Pacheco, Eliza Leat, Fábio Olmos, Luís Costa, Nuno Oliveira and Pedro Pereira for helping with the identification, Rúben Penha Fortuna and the BomBom Island Marine Team for the boat trip during which this record was made, and David Progin and Samuel Progin who also observed the bird. We also thank Ron Demey for his advice and guidance, and Alan Tye, Steve Howell and Nik Borrow for their comments on the submitted manuscript.

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Received 1 October 2015; revision accepted 14 October 2015.